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Reinterpreting Pacific Island Myths

with Māori Authors Tina Makereti and Whiti Hereaka

“That’s the way that Oceania is, it’s this vast place that’s full of stories, that’s very rich, that hasn’t always been seen that way since the empire spread,” said Tina Makereti, speaking today at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. “Those ideas of ourselves as connected to our kin around that, we’re reclaiming that.” She added. The writer was speaking with fellow Māori author, playwright and solicitor Whiti Hereaka about Pacific and Oceania writing.

“It’s this huge expanse of water which has often been seen as empty,” said Makerti, author of *The Imaginary Lives of James Poneke*. “They were doing nuclear tests there - and of course it’s heavily populated with islands, and our ancestors would go out beyond Aotearoa (New Zealand) where we come from, [they] travelled that for a long time.

“We lost the knowledge of how to navigate the Pacific but went to our cousins in other parts of the Pacific and they showed us how to navigate. Our legends tell us this, our genealogies tell us this, and we’ve reclaimed that knowledge of how to navigate the Pacific. We have this kinship.

“Our history goes back to the water and the sea.”

Hereaka, whose writing has been published in *Pūrākau: Māori Myths Retold by Māori Writers*, spoke of the importance to Pacific Islander people of their legends and stories; “With *Pūrākau*, the background was our histories. So making our histories more contemporary, so they’re a contemporary spin on traditional Māori myths and the reason we wanted to do that was we feel like those stories hold a relevance for us today. They’re a way of seeing the world which is useful. They’re not things tucked away in the reserved part of the library. It’s something that we talk about and use in our daily lives.”

“We’ve had to hold on to them so tightly so they don’t get taken away from us.”

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Makereti re-interpreted some of those stories through a contemporary lens in her writing; “I was like, what would happen if I made the actors in the myths as contemporary humans and how would they behave? And the thing about it is when you start playing with those stories in that way they make you do certain things, they make you talk about important things.

“For instance, one of the stories that I wrote... was Māui’s birth. He is known to have been, in the story of Māui, he’s sometimes described as a demi-god. He was born stillborn and put in his mother’s arms and she cut off the top-knot of her hair and wrapped him in it and put him in the sea. So I was like okay, use that as a model and what came out was the story of a young woman who’d had a stillbirth but she was a high school student and hiding it and having the baby in the bathroom. I felt that the myth of the story was speaking to a contemporary issue.”